TRAVEL BEST OF THE WORLD

They inspire us and teach us about the world: Meet our 2024 Travelers of the Year

These nine game changers are making a difference. Here they share their tips on how to be a better traveler.

By National Geographic Staff
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These nine travel industry leaders and adventurers inspire us to explore the world authentically and meaningfully.
ILLUSTRATION BY NATASHA CUNNINGHAM

From a family in search of African ancestors to a music icon celebrating her Tennessee roots, our nine Travelers of the Year inspire us to experience the best of the world and, once we're out the door, help make our journeys more meaningful. They are explorers, boundary breakers, and changemakers who know a thing or two about where and how to travel right now. Read on for their tips.

Outdoors inspiration: Pattie Gonia

Wyn Wiley, known professionally as Pattie Gonia, is a drag queen, environmental and LGBTQ+ activist, and community organizer.
ILLUSTRATION BY NATASHA CUNNINGHAM, PHOTOGRAPH BY SAMUEL CROSSLEY

Artist, environmentalist, and drag queen Wyn Wiley—known professionally as Pattie Gonia—helps LGBTQ+ youth discover the wonders of the outdoors. As founder of the nonprofit Outdoorist Oath, she brings the queer community together in the parks and wild spaces of Oregon, her home state.

Her feel-good music videos address environmental justice and pride in identity, and include collaborators such as cellist Yo-Yo Ma and Indigenous trans musician Quinn Christopherson.

"Every year my community fundraises to send 10 queer youth on a fully scholarshipped backpacking trip," she says. "One of the attendees told me and the group around the fire, 'Being on this trip has helped me reclaim a childhood I didn't get to have.' That's everything to me."

Top travel tip? Get up before the sun rises. Go out, walk about, and watch the world wake up.

How would you define your drag style? Campy, witty, sustainable, and unapologetic. A lady in the streets but a freak on the peaks.

Cultural caretaker: Liliana Palma Santos

Liliana Palma Santos is the founder of Zapotec Travel, a tour company that highlights the accomplishme... Read More
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Sign up for a Zapotec Travel tour in Oaxaca, Mexico, and you'll shop in local markets, take cooking classes with Indigenous chefs, participate in pottery workshops, or visit a woman-owned mezcal distillery. Founder Liliana Palma Santos' goal is to show travelers the rich connections between Indigenous Oaxaqueñas and the history and archaeology of their ancestors.

Her policy of not charging commission for the sales that artisans make on the tours leaves a hundred percent of the proceeds in their pockets. "I feel as if what I'm doing is what my ancestors have always planned for me," she says. "We have a word, *galguez*, which is about reciprocity and leaning on each other. The individual businesses I work with inspire me to do more."

What's always in your bag? A small bottle of mezcal. It can serve a ceremonial purpose in blessing things, a medicinal purpose if you have a stomach ache, or even as a gift.

Travel philosophy? Know the land you're on. In every community, every place that you go, there's Native land. There are people who have kept it protected and alive through generations, and I always want to honor that.

Disability access advocate: Vasu Sojitra

Vasu Sojitra is a professional athlete and a disability access strategist who works with companies to better promot... Read More
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With the help of his "ninjasticks" (forearm crutches), one-legged athlete Vasu Sojitra has skied off of Denali via the West Buttress, ascended the Grand Teton, and run the Beaten Path in the Beartooth Mountain Range. Leading by example, the Montana-based advocate tries to show people what life in the outdoors with a disability can mean. He brings his advocacy work indoors through organizations such as The North Face Explore Fund Council, where he develops inclusive guidelines for corporations and finds community projects to fund.

Through his Instagram posts, Sojitra shares his perspective on being an adaptive athlete, and suggests how people can make outdoor recreation more inclusive for adventurers with disabilities. His Inclusive Outdoors Project goes a step further by partnering with local guides to teach skills and fund trail running, backcountry skiing, ice climbing, and gravel biking.

What place are you excited about visiting? I'd like to check out Trinidad and Tobago and its rich Asian culture. A lot of Indians have relocated to Trinidad, and the combination of vibrant Caribbean, African, and Indian flavors in the resulting food makes it high on my travel list.

Top travel tip? Support an Indigenous community in whatever region you're in by buying art, crafts, food, or anything they're creating.

Culinary documentarian: Vicky Bennison

Vicky Bennison is the creator of Pasta Grannies, a YouTube channel devoted to the men and women who preser... Read More
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The founder of media company Pasta Grannies, Vicky Bennison searches throughout Italy to film *nonne*, who still make pasta by hand, sometimes in seldom seen traditional shapes such as pleated potato-filled *culurgiones* or coin-shaped *corzetti*.

Through viral YouTube videos and detailed cookbooks with QR codes that link back to the videos, Pasta Grannies shares lifetimes of culinary knowledge and family recipes. Fans often plan trips around Pasta Grannies destinations, like Tuscany and Sicily. The most popular video? Ninety-one-year-old Maria making lasagna in Faenza, a city 31 miles outside of Bologna.

Travel philosophy? Never forget that you're reliant on the kindness of strangers; make it a positive encounter for all concerned.

Genealogy trackers: The Anderson Family

Based in Ghana, the Anderson Family (parents Ike and Natalee and children Jasmine, Layton, and Kaylee)... Read More
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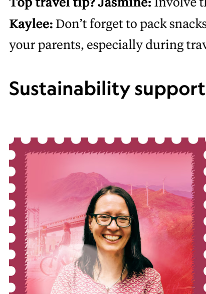
With the results of their genealogy tests guiding them, Natalee and Ike Anderson decided to leave their Miami home in 2018 and roam the world with their young kids, Jasmine (now 15), Kaylee (now 13), and Layton (now 9). They've traveled to 22 destinations, including Mexico, where they snorkeled in a cenote, and Canada, where they played in their first snow. In Egypt, they meditated inside the King's Tomb at the Pyramid of Giza before heading to Ghana, where they learned to weave traditional kente cloth.

It was in Ghana that they decided to settle down in 2021 and found their tour company, Exploring Legacy, which leads trips in West Africa and organizes rites of passage for young adults of African descent.

Top travel tip? Jasmine: Involve the children in planning activities and excursions. **Kaylee:** Don't forget to pack snacks and extra food. **Layton:** Stay alert and listen to your parents, especially during travel and in crowded areas.

Sustainability supporter: Susanne Etti



Susanne Etti is the global environmental impact manager for Intrepid Travel. Her work centers around decarb... Read More
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As the global environmental impact manager for tour operator Intrepid Travel, Susanne Etti has recently been instrumental in implementing carbon labeling for all Intrepid's trips (500 have been labeled so far with goals to have the rest done by mid-2024). Travelers can make a thorough climate-conscious decision by consulting each trip's carbon footprint. She also examines how the company can use fewer resources in order to decrease carbon output and preserve ecosystems, and how it can make more sustainable choices, such as replacing a flight with a train journey.

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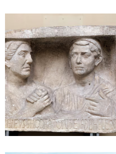

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"I love hearing when people come back from a trip and say that they've changed their habits at home, or have even changed their job because of what they've learned," Etti says.

Top travel tip? Travel slowly and stay in a place to get to know the people, shops, and surroundings. Train travel can have an overall slower feeling when you can see the countryside go by.

People champion: Zakia Moulaoui Guery

Zakia Moulaoui Guery founded Invisible Cities, a walking tour company based in Edinburgh, Scotland, where I... Read More
ILLUSTRATION BY NATASHA CUNNINGHAM, PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY ZAKIA MOULAOUI GUERY

Founder and CEO of a U.K.-based social enterprise called Invisible Cities, Zakia Moulaoui Guery trains people who have experienced being unhoused to become walking tour guides of their own city. The company offers tours in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, York, and Cardiff, with Liverpool—as well as the Scottish Borders region—to be added in 2024. "I've been told that going on our tours is like following a friend through the city," Guery says. "Considering the stories of our guides, I think we are succeeding at breaking down the stigma that exists around homelessness."

What's always in your bag? A cross-stitch project. I learned when I was younger and picked it up again after my mother passed in 2020. It helps me relax and focus on something for a few hours.

Top travel tip? Take the time to enjoy. Sometimes, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to see as many things as possible and tick them off our list. I find the best trips I've had were a mix of visiting all the places, but also having days where all I did was have wine in the sun and walk around, or wake up late and read my book on the balcony.

Hotel innovator: Leo Ghitis

Leo Ghitis is CEO and co-founder of Nayara Resorts, a collection of sustainable luxury hotels in Central and South America.
ILLUSTRATION BY NATASHA CUNNINGHAM, PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY NAYARA RESORTS

At Nayara Resorts, a collection of six luxury properties in Costa Rica, Panama, and Chile, guests can visit a sloth sanctuary on the fringes of the Arenal Volcano and stargaze in the Atacama Desert. "I am a firm believer in regenerative travel," says founder Leo Ghitis. "I feel it's important to leave a place better than when you arrived, and look for hotels, brands, and operators that are actively giving back and working to improve the world around us." The company recently partnered with a local bank in Costa Rica to create a housing community for its employees, particularly single mothers.

Why is travel important to you? When people travel, it expands their minds and makes them more compassionate, both for the people they meet and the landscapes they see.

Hospitality queen: Dolly Parton

Dolly Parton, iconic singer-songwriter, actress, and philanthropist, has built a hospitality empire in Pigeon... Read More
ILLUSTRATION BY NATASHA CUNNINGHAM, PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE DOLLYWOOD COMPANY

Entertainment icon and philanthropist Dolly Parton has built a hospitality empire in eastern Tennessee. Centered in Pigeon Forge, it includes Dollywood amusement park, two resorts (including the just opened HeartSong), restaurants, and attractions. All are themed to celebrate the landscape and culture of the Smokies. "We're lucky to be in the part of the world that I believe is just absolutely the most perfect place that God has created," Parton says. "Those big, beautiful Smoky Mountains provide all the inspiration we could ever dream of finding."

Her fans know that she often shows up for the season opening of Dollywood in March. But she'll also sometimes make a surprise appearance at one of the theme park's stage shows.

What's your travel or hospitality philosophy? Well, it's the Golden Rule; treat others the way you want to be treated. Whether you're hosting someone in your home—we call our Dollywood employees hosts because they are hosting our guests every single day in our "home"—or you're a guest in their home, you should always treat them with love and compassion whether you've known them for 50 years or five minutes.

What's always in your bag? My makeup. Back in the '80s when I'd be in Los Angeles, I'd sleep with my makeup on in case there was an earthquake and I had to go outside at night. I didn't want anybody taking a picture of me if I had just gotten out of the bed in the middle of the night!

What role has travel played in your music? I love traveling on the road because you're able to see and experience places you might not be able to see when you're flying over it all. Taking a good old-fashioned road trip really just gets my mind flowing. I can't tell you how many hundreds of songs I've written on the road, but it's pretty safe to say that if you've sung it, I probably wrote it on the road.

Reporting by Jill K. Robinson.

Editor's note: This story was originally published on January 30, 2024. It incorrectly spelled Natalee Anderson's name and the number of properties managed by Nayara resorts. It has been updated.

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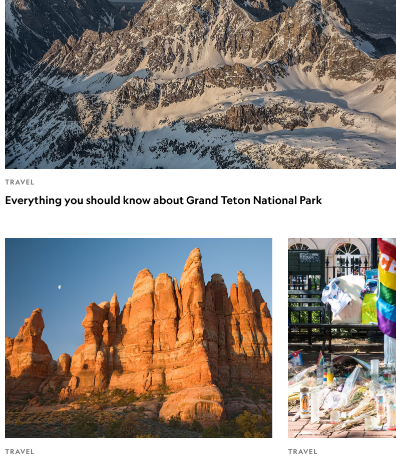

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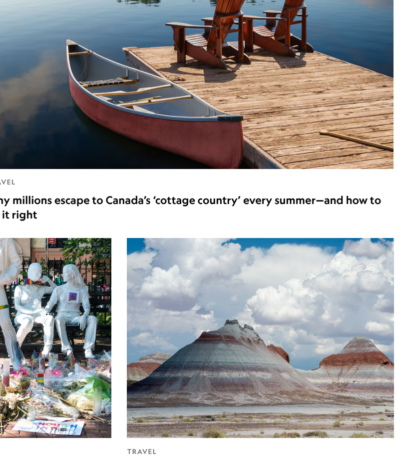

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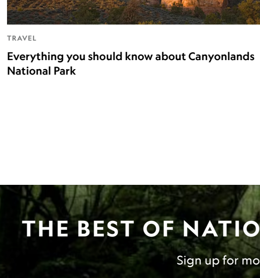

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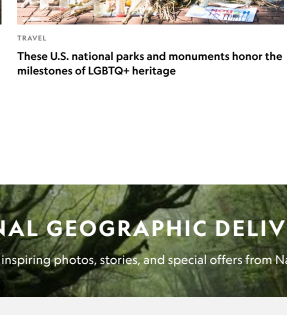

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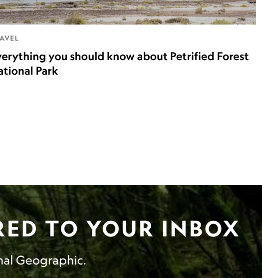

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